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AUTHOR Johannessen, Larry R.
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses case studies as an active learning strategy for helping students develop the critical thinking processes that are key to composing, interpreting, and responding to literature and are important in other fields as well. To illustrate how case studies work in the classroom, why they are exciting and beneficial, and how they are inter-disciplinary, a sample case study exercise is presented, along with additional examples. Case studies are then defined, and good characteristics outlined to help instructors develop their own. The paper concludes by discussing some of the benefits of using case studies to teach writing and literature. (Contains 26 references and an appendix containing three sample case studies.) (EF)

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# ENCOURAGING ACTIVE LEARNING WITH CASE STUDIES

**Larry R. Johannessen**
Assistant Professor and Director of Graduate Programs in Education

Graduate Studies and Education Department
Barat College
700 E. Westleigh Road
Lake Forest, Illinois 60045

Telephone: (847) 640-6332
Fax: (847) 604-6377
e-mail: ljohanne@barat.edu

Mailing Address:
1253 Reading Court
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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# ENCOURAGING ACTIVE LEARNING WITH CASE STUDIES

By Larry R. Johannessen

## INTRODUCTION

Good Morning. Creating an active learning environment is much easier said than done. There can be a variety of factors that work against success. One problem is that using active learning strategies is risky. Teachers who use active learning strategies may have to defend their use of "unorthodox" methods. They may be questioned by students, parents, and administrators. They may be frowned upon by colleagues. For example, a couple of years ago one of my student teachers wanted to use a case study in her teaching that produced a great deal of debate and discussion. She asked her cooperating teacher if she could do the activity the next day. She explained why she wanted to use it, how it would work, and what students would be learning. Her cooperating teacher frowned and said, "Well, I guess so, if you feel you absolutely must do this sort of thing. But," she added, "I won't come and observe. I'll come and watch sometime when you are actually teaching something." It seems that the kind of active learning environment that this student teacher was trying to create was so threatening to this cooperating teacher and her traditional view of teaching and learning that she felt the need to attack what my student teacher wanted to do by suggesting that it was not really teaching.

Given this kind of problem, why should you use case studies or any of the other strategies you have heard about here today? The reason is simple. Case studies are one very exciting way to go about creating an environment for active learning, and they are naturally inter-disciplinary. While case studies have been used extensively in business, law, medicine, and clinical psychology, they have not been widely used in teacher education or in English teaching. I will discuss how case studies are an exciting strategy for helping students learn critical thinking processes that are key to composing and interpreting and responding to literature and important in other fields as well. I have a

limited amount of time today, so since this is a workshop, I'm going to start by asking you to do a case pretty much as I would have students do it, so that I can illustrate how they work in the classroom and give you a clear sense of some of the reasons why the are exciting and beneficial to use with students and how they are inter-disciplinary. Then, I'm going to show you one or two additional examples of case students that I have used to teach literature and writing, and I will conclude by defining what a case is and discussing the characteristics of good cases, which should help you to create your own cases, and I'll discuss some the benefits of using case studies to teach writing and literature.

**THE PLATOON COMMANDER'S DILEMMA**

The first case I'd like to show you might appear at first glance that it was designed to be used with Vietnam War combat narratives, and while it is true that I have used it for that purpose, that is not the original reason why I created this activity. In fact, I created it to go with a war novel that is often taught in the American Literature high school and college curriculum. I have found that this activity works well with many twentieth century combat narratives.

It is set up to prepare students for the kind of modern warfare soldiers have to deal with in war, as well as for some the themes and issues that they will encounter in their reading, and it also seems to help them to understand the characters. In the modern war novel there are at least two things converge to create a moral dilemma for soldier's who fight in war. First, there is movement from innocence through experience, which involves "an agonizing consideration of the realities and ironies of war," which is like Marlow's confronting "the horror" or moral conflict and psychic journey in Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*. Secondly, the brutal and impersonal nature of modern war (along with other factors) combined to create very high levels of frustration and battle stress for soldiers. The problem is that students sometimes have difficulty understanding why some of the soldiers they read about seem to be or seem to become so callous toward civilians

and the enemy. As one soldier writes in a letter home in *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam* (1986): "After awhile, instead of a yellow streak, you develop a mean streak"; or, as another soldier said in a letter home: "[After awhile,] it is so easy to kill in a war." "The Platoon Commander's Dilemma" activity (Appendix, p. 21) is designed to help students with this particularly troubling aspect of a soldier's education or movement from innocence to experience. Another way to think about it is that at some point every soldier has to confront a moral choice that is a key part of his or her experience.

I would like you to do this activity somewhat as I have students do it. Normally, I would pass this out to students just prior to starting or just after we have started a major combat narrative. First, let us read over the case together (read the case aloud). **Now, I would like you all to spend the next ten minutes or so writing out your answers to the questions posed at the end.** It is really important that you do the writing. Thank you, I appreciate it.

Now, I would like to ask a few of you to read your compositions, and then we'll spend a few minutes talking about your responses.

- Would someone read their composition? Would someone else read theirs that said something different?
- Someone else?
- Could I have someone else read theirs who has a different viewpoint?
- Did anyone else come up with a different solution? Could you read yours?

Let's talk about some of your solutions to this problem. (Lead discussion using the following discussion questions as a guide):

**"The Platoon Commander's Dilemma": Discussion Questions**

1. If Pickett fails to shoot, has he committed a crime? Why or why not?

2. If Pickett fails to shoot, is he being disloyal to the men in his platoon, especially those who died? Why or why not?

3. If Pickett shoots, has he committed a crime? Why or why not?

4. If Pickett decides to shoot the woman and child, and it turns out that they are innocent, do you think he has done anything wrong? Why or why not?

5. What do you think of what Juarez tells Pickett? Why?

6. If Pickett fails to shoot, how might the men in Pickett's platoon react? Why?

7. If Picket shoots, how might the men in Pickett's platoon react? Why?

8. Are the woman and her son just two innocent civilians caught in a bad situation, or are they guerrilla soldiers? How do you know?

9. What do you think the morals of war are? What criterion can someone use to live by in war?

Once all students that want to have had a chance to read their paper and participate in the discussion, you should tell them that characters in the work have to confront similar situations, and that they should examine how they react in these situations, and try to

determine the impact that these experiences have on characters and what the author is trying to tell us about the nature of war in through these situations.

As a variation on the format I outlined for you, after students have written out their responses, you might have them meet in small groups to read their compositions, and you might have them either pick one composition that they will read to the class, or have them discuss their responses and try to reach a consensus as to their answers to the questions prior to the whole class discussion.

This kind of activity helps to prepare students for the themes and issues that they will encounter in their reading and also helps them to understand the characters. The scenario I created here for the case is sort of a combination of a similar scene in Oliver Stone's film *Platoon*, and the My Lai massacre that occurred during the Vietnam War, and as you may recall it involved a Captain Medina and Lt. Calley. However, I actually originally created this activity to help students understand this problem in Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell To Arms*. Many students fail to understand Frederic Henry's decision to desert from the Italian Army, and they see him as a coward. Even worse, many fail to see the irony of his situation, he shoots a sergeant for deserting when his ambulance unit is in retreat, and yet he decides to desert when he is about to be shot for the same thing he shot the sergeant for. In short, this activity helps prepare students for this key passage in the novel and the moral choice the main character must make.

Here are some other works that this activity works well with: Eric Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, and, of course, numerous works of Vietnam literature such as James Webb's *Fields of Fire*, Philip Caputo,'s *A Rumor of War*, Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July*, and Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Going After Cacciato*, and *The Things They Carried*.

I think you can also see how this activity helps students learn the thinking skills and strategies involved in argumentation, as well as skills and strategies that are important to other subject areas such as history and ethics.

Follow-up Writing

Often, I have students write a composition about what they think Lieutenant Henry, the hero of the novel, would have done had he been in Pickett's situation and why. I ask them to cite evidence from the novel to support their interpretation. Of course, as they read the novel, we compare similar situations that characters must deal with and the case and we talk about how and why various characters and the author might answer the questions posed at the end of the case. So, after they have finished the work, I give students the following assignment:

> **Writing about Ernest Hemingway's, *A Farewell To Arms.*** Write an essay in which you explain how Lieutenant Frederic Henry would answer the questions posed in "The Platoon Commander's Dilemma." In other words, what would Lieutenant Henry do if he were in Pickett's situation and why, and what would he say about what Captain Juarez told Pickett and why? Make sure that you answer all the questions in the case. Also, make sure that you present evidence from the novel to support your reasoning and explain how your evidence supports your view of what the Lieutenant Henry would say about "The Platoon Commander's Dilemma."

I think you can see how doing the case study activity prior to their reading and how discussing similar situations in the novel and how characters would answer the questions in the case helps prepare students for this assignment. I have gotten some very interesting and insightful responses to this assignment.

Another assignment I sometimes give them also involves the case. I often collect their writing on the case prior to their reading of the work, and then I hand them back to them when I give them the following assignment: Write a composition in which you

explain how and why your views have changed about how you would answer the questions posed in "The Platoon Commander's dilemma" as a result of reading the novel. Make sure that you explain how you answered the questions prior to reading the narrative and why, and how you would answer the questions now after reading the narrative. Provide specific evidence from the narrative to explain how and why your views have changed. Again, I think you can see how the pre-reading case study activity and follow up discussions as students read helps to prepare them for this assignment. More important, we rarely ask students to reflect on the impact that a work of literature has had on them. This kind of assignment specifically asks students to do that. I would argue that we ought to give students more assignments like this one.

**SURVIVAL DILEMMA: WHAT WOULD YOU DO?**

The next activity on the next page of your handout (Appendix, p. 22) is designed as a prereading activity for works such as William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat," Richard Conlin's "The Most Dangerous Game," Jack London's "To Build a Fire" and *The Call of the Wild*. The activity is intended to put students in a "survival mode"--to make them think about what it takes to survive in a given environment. In addition, this activity also gives students practice in the skills and thinking strategies involved in argumentation. This activity contains "built in controversy" (See Kahn, Walter, and Johannessen, 1984). In other words, there is no one answer. It encourages a variety of possible responses. The activity helps students practice strategies such as generating supporting evidence for a claim, challenging others viewpoints, clarifying reasoning, answering objections from their audience, giving and explaining evidence, and criticizing faulty logic.

If you will please follow along as I read the case and assignment. (Read problem.) After reading the problem to students, I put them in small groups to come up with their solutions. Sometimes I have them come up with their own solution before putting them

into groups. After 15 or 20 minutes, longer if they need it, I reform the class for discussion. I have students present their solutions and discuss differences.

Usually this activity generates such a lively discussion that often I need only use the first question and the debate begins. But here is a set of guide questions we use to keep the discussion moving and keep students on task.

- What is one thing you decided you could definitely get rid of? Why?
- Does any group disagree with that? Why?
- What is one thing you should definitely keep? Why?
- Does everyone agree with that? Why? Why not?
- What items on the list haven't we discussed? What would you do with x (item)? Why?
- What is your complete list of what you are going to keep and what you are going to get rid of and why?
- How does your list give the group the best chance for survival? Why?

In the small group and whole class discussions students are confronting the very kind of problem the characters are faced with in the literature and they are verbally practicing the thinking strategies involved in argumentation, and, of course, they are learning and practicing skills and strategies that are important in a variety of subject areas. Here is an example of the kind of discussion that takes place in the whole class discussion. The following example is from a twelfth grade remedial class. They are arguing about the necessity of oars.

**Student #1:** There's nowhere to row in the middle of the Atlantic anyway, so why do we need oars?

**Student #2:** But what if they start to go over a waterfall. They would need to row to stay away from it.

Chorus of voices: No, no, no Carla.

**Student #3:** They are in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. It is an ocean. There aren't any waterfalls in the ocean.

**Student #4:** We thought we should keep at least two oars because if we see a ship then we would be able to row to it.

**Student #5:** But it says that there are strong winds and high waves. Oars are going to be useless in conditions like that.

The important point here, besides the funny things that students sometimes say, is that giving students a concrete situation results in emotional involvement in the problem. Also important is the fact that there are a number of possible solutions. Had the list of items included a number of clearly nonessential items such as benches, food storage boxes, and an anchor, the solution could be too clear cut to be arguable. And without argument the students would not be practicing the thinking strategies essential to effectively persuade others of their viewpoints and important in other disciplines, and I would not be effectively preparing them for the "survival: values under stress" problem that they will encounter in the literature they are about to read.

Even though the activity primarily focuses on the physical necessities for survival, often the activity reveals values inherent in the problem and the discussion then focuses on the social dimensions.

Once all students have had a chance to express their views, I often have students discuss arguments that seemed particularly strong and what made them strong, what kinds of arguments seemed weak and why, and how certain arguments could be refuted.

As a follow-up, I have students write to convince others that certain choices of what to keep and what to throw away will give the group the best chance for survival.

**DOES SHE DESERVE HONOR?**

I have used the last activity in your handout to help prepare students for Nathanial Hawthorne's novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, and also to teach students some of the skills and strategies involved in writing argument (Appendix, p. 23). A major purpose of the activity is to help students overcome their initial difficulty with the seemingly alien seventeenth century colonial Puritan society of Boston, Massachusetts. In addition, another purpose of the activity is to prepare students for some of the issues and themes in the novel, such as social responsibility, Puritanism, and the other perspectives that Hawthorne brings into conflict with Puritanism. This activity might also be used to introduce some of the skills of argumentation, such as making and supporting claims with evidence, warrants, and/or refutation or counter arguments.

(Read case.) After reading the case, I often have students write their responses to the questions posed at the bottom, and then I put students in small groups and have them read their responses and attempt to reach a consensus as a group on whether Jennifer Dinesen should be admitted to the National Honor Society. We are going to skip the writing part here today, and instead I am going to ask you to get with three or four people sitting around you and try to decide whether or not Jennifer Dinesen should be admitted to the National Honor Society. I'll give you about ten minutes.

Then, after 15 minutes or so--after most or all have reached a consensus, some groups may not be able to agree--I reform the whole class. (You might want to compile the results of their decisions on the board. I have found that this can be an effective way to focus the discussion on the key elements of student disagreement.) Then, I lead a class discussion focusing on the reasoning for their decisions.

This discussion forces them to consider a large audience of their peers--just as they had to do the same thing in their small groups--why, for example, an unwed mother would or would not "lead" others in the wrong direction. In other words, the activity is structured

so that students must consider the same sort of issues and arguments that they will be reading about in the novel. In terms of the thinking skills involved in argument, they must come up with arguments and counter-arguments and evidence from the case to justify their decisions. For example, in attempting to explain why an unwed mother has not lost her "character," students will have to refute the opposing viewpoint that an unwed mother is not of strong character.

Here are some questions to use as a guide in leading the class discussion or in helping small groups attempt to arrive at a consensus:

*How would you define "good character"?

*What qualities of "character" does Jennifer exhibit, if any?
How does she exhibit them? What qualities does she lack?
How does she lack them?

*Does "good character" have anything to do with Jennifer's situation? Why or why not?

*Has Jennifer lost her "character"? Why or why not? Explain.

*What does "leadership" mean?

*Why qualities of "leadership" does Jennifer exhibit, if any?
How does she exhibit them?

*What qualities does she lack? How does she lack them?

*Will Jennifer "lead" others in the wrong direction? Why or why not?

*Should Jennifer be admitted to the National Honor Society? Why or why not?

*What arguments and evidence will the opposing view point to? How might you refute them?

These questions help students focus in on key elements of the case and refine their arguments and counter-arguments.

It is important to note that there is no **one** right or wrong answer. This inevitably leads to lively small group and whole class discussions in which students are actively debating, considering the very issues they will read about and practicing the thinking skills involved in argumentation.

Here is an example of an exchange that took place in one eleventh grade class after students had discussed the questions in small groups:

> **Student #1:** We thought Jennifer exhibited strong leadership because after she had her baby she devoted all of her out of school time to her most important responsibility--"caring for her baby daughter." She is showing others that she is taking responsibility for her actions.
>
> **Student #2:** We thought exactly the opposite. She lives at home with her parents. Her parents are supporting her and "they take care of the baby" when she is at school. If she was really a leader, she would get a job and support herself and her baby instead of letting her parents support them.
>
> **Student #1:** You're wrong. When most high school girls get pregnant, they usually hide it so that nobody knows. Jennifer is just the opposite. She is taking a lot of stuff from other kids in school. It shows a lot of "courage" to stay in school, keep her daughter, and face all the stuff from other kids. She is showing other kids that you can make a mistake and live with that mistake.
>
> **Students #3:** You just said it: "Mistake"! By getting pregnant she made a mistake that shows she lacks leadership. A true leader would not go crying to everyone about how "deeply hurt" she is by the faculty selection committee's decision because she has "worked so hard for four years."

What this brief example illustrates is how the activity engages students in the debate they will encounter in the novel and involves them in the skills of argumentation, particularly refutation. Also, they are making inferences about her true motives and

drawing on evidence in the case to support their interpretations, which is exactly what they ill have to do when they read the novel and, for example, make inferences about Hester's motives for refusing to divulge who Pearl's father is and learn about the conflicting values in Puritan society.

Once all students have had a chance to express their views, you might want to have students discuss arguments and counter-arguments that seemed particularly strong and what made them strong, as well as those that were weak and why. Also, you might want to discuss how weak arguments and counter-arguments could be improved.

As a follow-up you might have students write a composition explaining why Jennifer should or should not be admitted to the National Honor Society. Students should include counter-arguments to refute the opposing viewpoint.

What is particularly gratifying about doing this activity prior to their reading is that as students read the novel, they are often quick to point to the case when they discuss their interpretations. I am most pleased when some student suddenly says, "This is just like that case we read about Jennifer Dinesen."

It is important to note that as with the previous activities I have shown you this one also helps students learn the thinking skills and strategies involved in argumentation, interpreting literature, and skills and strategies that are key in other subject areas.

**WHAT ARE CASES?**

Some of you might be asking, well, you have been talking a great deal about cases, and what exactly is a case? Let me try to address this question.

Smagorinsky (1993) defines case studies for teaching literature as "problematic examples of people who find themselves in thorny situations that parallel the circumstances of the literary characters" (p. 162). In terms of composition and inter-disciplinary instruction, we might expand this definition by saying that the problematic examples should actively engage students in learning and practicing the skills and strategies that are key to

writing and a variety of disciplines, as well as to critical thinking and interpreting literature. Case studies are often in the form of a narrative story and usually provide considerable details (a paragraph or more) and present a complex problem that requires study and analysis. Most often the study and analysis is best accomplished through some combination of writing or small group discussion, followed by a whole-class discussion and debate of the case and proposed solutions or small groups lead a whole class in an analysis-discussion. That is, successful case analysis typically involves high levels of student interaction and a minimum amount of teacher lecture or talk. A good case study will depict the literary or composing problem in student terms and will engage students in learning and practicing critical thinking strategies that are crucial to interpreting and responding to literature and/or composing and are important to other subject areas. A good case study helps students connect their prior knowledge to literary issues. You might think of them as a bridge between students' personal experiences and the experiences they encounter and try to make sense of in literature and skills and strategies involved in thinking and writing. The case study helps them make sense of what they read or the composing task they are about to tackle.

## THE CASE FOR CASE STUDIES

In addition, there are several benefits teachers might expect from using cases. Some of these benefits are derived from Merseth's (1991) analysis of the benefits of applying case methods in teacher education and that also apply to teaching English. These benefits include:

1. Cases create an environment for active learning. They involve students in their own learning. Students cannot sit back passively as they might in a lecture situation, but must share an active responsibility in the learning that occurs.

2. They tend to generate lively and engaging discussions. Students have the opportunity to begin taking responsibility for their own learning as they express their own knowledge, values, opinions, and interpretations about the cases.
3. Cases encourage the creation of a community of learners. By taking responsibility for their own learning as well as contributing to the learning of others, students learn to work together.

Furthermore, as Kahn, Walter, and Johannessen (1984), McCann (1996), Smagorinsky (1993), and Smagorinsky, McCann and Kern (1987) argue:

4. Using cases prior to reading better prepares students to recognize interpretive problems and solve them appropriately when they encounter them as they read the literature.
5. Cases help students tap into their prior knowledge and build a "schemata" that will enable them to interpret and respond to literature.
6. They engage students in reading, writing, critical thinking, and problem-solving processes that are important in a number of other disciplines; they help students observe closely, develop skills and strategies involved in argument, defining, and comparing and contrasting; and they help students make inferences, and articulate larger principles and concepts crucial to comprehending and responding to literature.

Finally, as Johannessen (1995) and Johannessen, Kahn, and Walter (1984) argue:

7. Using cases encourages students to read and write because they generate interest and enthusiasm for a work of literature or for a writing task.

8. Cases scaffold learning because they provide a framework or context that will help students overcome difficulties they encounter in reading and writing.

In other words, cases help students come to understand the characters, concepts and themes in the literature, primarily through the discussion-debate.

## CONCLUSION

I have found that case studies are a powerful strategy to use for helping students learn critical thinking processes that are key to interpreting and responding to literature, composing, and a variety of disciplines. But, in closing, I think that it is important that I emphasize a couple of things about using cases in the classroom. With most students it probably isn't enough to just have students read the cases and then perhaps write about them. For case studies to be successful, you will probably need to have students discuss and debate the issues involved and problems in the cases and their solutions. It is through this active inter-disciplinary learning environment in which interaction and discussion are the medium of exchange that students come to understand and use the knowledge that they can learn through case studies. This kind of active learning environment encourages students to become part of a community of learners in which they take responsibility for their own learning and contribute to the learning of others. Through the use of cases our classrooms can become exciting places where students are engaged with literature and enthusiastic about writing tasks and actively learning in an inter-disciplinary environment.

While case studies cannot solve all of our teaching problems, they do have much to offer. They can enliven literary study, help students learn how to interpret and write about literature and learn critical thinking and problem-solving skills and strategies that are key to composition and to other disciplines, and help our students to become more independent learners. Finally, they help to focus the classroom on the students and their own inquiry, reducing their reliance on the teacher.

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# APPENDIX

## CASE STUDIES

# The Platoon Commander's Dilemma

During the Vietnam War, Second Lieutenant John Pickett was an infantry platoon commander in a company that was operating in the Hiep Duc Valley area, Quang Tin Province in the I Corp Tactical Zone. The company had recently moved into this area that had been an enemy stronghold for many years. As a soldier he was taught that he must obey all orders of his superior officers. To disobey is a crime.

While his company was searching the village of Nui Chom, one of Pickett's men set off a booby trap that killed two men and badly wounded a third. A hasty investigation by the company commander, Captain Jose Juarez, uncovered evidence that the village was inhabited by only women and children and also pointed to a woman and her eleven-year old child as the possible culprits. Juarez ordered Pickett to shoot the woman and her son to make an example of them.

Pickett was appalled at the idea of killing women and children, especially when there was a chance they might be innocent. He voiced his opinion, but his company commander, his superior officer, said that as a good soldier he must follow orders. He told Pickett that he owed more loyalty to his fellow soldiers than to a bunch of murdering enemy villagers. Pickett looked down at the torn bodies of his dead and wounded troopers and thought about how they had carried out his orders without question for the past few months. Maybe he did owe them something more.

Pickett walked over to the woman and her son who were tied up and squatting on the ground. He took out his pistol and put it to the woman's head. She and her young son began crying and whimpering something in Vietnamese that he could not understand.

Captain Juarez joined Pickett and reminded him that with no men around, these villagers were probably the wives and children of enemy soldiers. As Pickett thought about what to do, his platoon medic told him that Smitty had just died from the wounds he received from the booby trap.

Pickett could feel the anger rise in the pit of his stomach. Now there were three men dead because of what this woman and her son may have done. Suddenly he wanted very badly to carry out the Captain's orders. As he took the safety off of the pistol, he could hear the village women and children crying and whimpering. He tightened his finger on the trigger, but then he hesitated.

### Questions

What should Pickett do: refuse to kill the woman and her son or shoot them? Why is that the right thing for him to do? Do you agree with what Captain Juarez told Pickett? Why or why not?

# Survival Dilemma: What Would You Do?

A ship is sinking, and you have managed to board a lifeboat with twelve other people. Most of the people were not able to reach the cabins to get warm clothing so they are in street clothes. One woman is in a bathing suit. The ship is in the North Atlantic, and the temperature is about 32 degrees Fahrenheit, and there are strong winds and high waves. The lifeboat has no motor, so it must be rowed. You may have to spend several days at sea depending on when the boat is spotted. The ocean is very foggy with low, heavy clouds. The boat is dangerously overloaded so in order to keep safely afloat you **must** dump 60 pounds of weight. You must decide which items you will remove. For safety reasons, you may not suspend any items from the lifeboat. You may not remove any of the people. These are the items from which you must choose:

5 slicker raincoats with hoods -- each 2 lbs.
30 cans of tuna fish (flip tops) -- each 1 lb.
a 2 gallon container full of water -- 10 lbs.
a battery operated signal light -- 8 lbs.
3 skin diving wet suits -- each 5 lbs.
2 buckets for bailing -- each 3 lbs.
4 wool blankets -- each 3 lbs.
a large S.O.S. flag -- 3 lbs.
a first aid kit -- 10 lbs.
8 oars -- each 5 lbs.
Total -- 140 lbs.

Adapted from Kahn, Elizabeth A., Carolyn C. Walter, & Larry R. Johannessen. (1984). "Making Small Groups Work: Controversy Is The Key." *English Journal*, 73.2 (February): 63-65.

# DOES SHE DESERVE HONOR?

Jennifer Dinesen, a high school senior, was denied induction to the National Honor Society (NHS) because she is an unmarried mother. A faculty selection committee at Streamridge High School invited Jennifer to join the school's National Honor Society but then revoked the offer when it discovered that the 18 year old had a daughter. Students are selected for the National Honor Society based on four criteria: character, leadership, service, and scholastic achievement. Dinesen met the academic requirements, but the committee felt that because she is an unwed mother her character is in question and she is not a good role model (leader) for other students.

The rules of the National Honor Society state that "pregnancy cannot be the basis for automatic rejection," but each school is allowed to set its own standards as long as they are applied consistently. The superintendent explained that Jennifer Dinesen is not the first student at Streamridge to be denied membership in the school's honor society because of sexual activity.

As a senior, Jennifer has a 3.8 grade point average. She has been a member of the Spanish Club since freshman year and served as secretary of the club her sophomore year. She was a starting player on the junior varsity girls' basketball team her freshman and sophomore years. During her junior year, she was in charge of decorations for the school's homecoming dance, and she also worked as a volunteer four hours a week at a local day care center for disabled children. All of her out-of-school time during her senior year has been spent caring for her baby daughter. Jennifer lives with her parents, and when she is at school, they take care of the baby. She has not received any discipline referrals for four years.

Jennifer says, "I'm deeply hurt by the school's decision because I have worked so hard for four years."

## Questions

What is at issue are two qualities the honor society demands: leadership and character. As an unwed mother, has Jennifer lost her character? Will she lead others in the wrong direction? Do you agree with the faculty committee's decision not to induct Jennifer Dinesen into the National Honor Society? Why or why not?